

Jennifer Tu
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Living the Story of Generations

My mom and dad never went to high school. They grew up during the Chinese Cultural Revolution when, from 1966 to 1976, Mao Zedong commenced with ‘brainwashing’ the general population. His stated goal was to preserve ‘true’ Communism by purging capitalist and traditional elements from society and imposing his own thought as the dominant ideology. He shut down the nation’s schools, and thus 16 million urban youth were relocated to work in the countryside, including my mom. At the northernmost part of China (Heilongjiang), while sowing rice paddies as far as the eye could see, she kept up her education by teaching farm children, often older than herself, basic reading, writing, and math. My dad stayed in Shanghai and worked in a metal welding factory by day, taking classes in mathematics by night. During that decade, drops of hot metal would burn through his gloves, and accidents would happen, giving him the countless scars and stories that he would later tell me at bedtime. Many of my parents’ friends joined the Red Guard during that decade, harassing not only the ‘bourgeois’ but also the educated and elderly. Not my parents. When Mao Zedong died and schools were finally reopened, each of them applied to the University of Shanghai, where the admissions rate was lower than our Early Admissions’. They were vying with men and women who should have been matriculating over the past ten years. Call it fortune that they had educated older siblings to look up to, or call it their own free will – my parents resisted peer pressure, or should I say, the pressure of an entire nation. They persisted and got what they believed in: education. They also met there, at the University of Shanghai and, decades later, got me.

My parents’ lives have taught me three lessons: to value hard work and perseverance, to seek education and independent thought, and to live with compassion through action. The story you’ve heard is an illustration of the first two; the perseverance, hard work, and wisdom of my parents remind me that even in the midst of unimaginable injustice, we must stay true to ourselves and learn from those whom we respect and admire.

My parents have also shown me how important it is to live with compassion.

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Because my parents were so familiar with brainwashing after the Cultural Revolution, when I was baptized in high school, they warned me not to become aggressively religious or dogmatic. They had come to faith after immigrating to the U.S., when an older Chinese couple invited them to tea, to dinner, and finally, to their church. It was through a gradual process of building community and trust that they saw a glimpse of God's love. Carrying on their story, I now find their conclusion to be true – showing compassion and love to others means more than trying to argue about theology with words or propaganda. As Paul writes in 1 John 3:18 of the Bible, “Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”

Yes, from the deep lesson of hard work and perseverance, to the deeper lesson of education and independent thought, to the deepest lesson of loving others, my parents have taught me so much and shaped who I am today. So whose story am I living? At times, I feel like my life could be called a two-act play. In the first, my purpose would be to make my parents happy; since they chose to have me after settling down in the U.S., knowing that they'd be able to support me, that'd be my job, right? And having achieved that by getting to Harvard, I would now be in the second act, by the end of which I hopefully 'find myself' in this new country and write a completely different story.

But I've realized that this isn't the case. My story *is* my parents' story. I will always want to make my parents happy, but that doesn't mean that I'm not being true to myself. Rather, because my values are their values, and by learning from them and teaching those after me, I am finding my place in a story of generations. And by sharing this with you, I also encourage you to reflect upon what story you're living out.